

GAO

Fact Sheet for the Honorable
Richard T. Schulze, House of
Representatives

October 1989

MILITARY PERSONNEL

Information on Active Duty Deaths and Survivor Benefits



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**National Security and
International Affairs Division**

B-236907

October 20, 1989

The Honorable Richard T. Schulze
House of Representatives

Dear Mr. Schulze:

In response to your July 10, 1989, request, we are providing information on the number and causes of military personnel deaths over the past 9 years. We are also providing information on programs that compensate the families of deceased military personnel. Information on safety-related issues has been provided separately.

Results in Brief

During fiscal years 1980 through 1988, the latest years for which complete data are available, a total of 19,716 military personnel died while on active duty. Of these deaths, 327 resulted from hostile action, 12,271 from accidents (both on- and off-duty), 3,552 from illness or disease, 1,039 from civil homicide, 2,198 from suicide, and 329 from other or unreported causes.

The Department of Defense (DOD), as well as the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and the Social Security Administration, have several programs to provide compensation and relief for the families and dependents of deceased service personnel. These programs include insurance, survivor benefits, and allowances to defray certain burial costs.

Reporting DOD Deaths

DOD Instruction 7730.63 establishes casualty reporting requirements for the military services. It requires that casualty data be certified and reported monthly by the respective military service casualty office¹ to the Office of the Secretary of Defense. DOD then compiles the data and incorporates it into a published report. The most recent report, Department of Defense Worldwide U.S. Active Duty Military Personnel Casualties, October 1, 1979 through September 30, 1988, is the source of the data provided here.

Appendix I shows military active duty deaths for fiscal years 1980 through 1988 by military service and cause.

¹The addresses of the military service casualty offices are listed in appendix II.

Survivor Benefits for Active Duty Casualties

The survivors of military personnel who die while on active duty may be entitled to a number of benefits provided by several government agencies, as well as some provided by private sources.

The survivors are entitled to any unpaid pay and allowances due to the military member at the time of death. In addition, the surviving family may remain in government quarters for 90 days following the date of death, or receive up to 90 days of housing allowance (both basic allowance for quarters and variable housing allowance). If the family moves out of government quarters prior to 90 days, then the family will receive the cash balance of the 90-day housing allowance. Movement of dependents who are eligible to relocate at government expense and shipment of household goods allowed before the member's death are permitted within one year to any selected location. Household goods in transit can be stored for up to 6 months.

DOD also provides a death gratuity intended to defray immediate expenses. This benefit is payable to beneficiaries usually within 24 hours of the member's death. Although the law establishes this gratuity at a level equal to six times the active duty member's monthly basic pay, a maximum payment of \$3,000 was established in law in 1956. Because even the lowest paid personnel receive more than \$500 per month in basic pay, the limitation means that everyone gets \$3,000. DOD officials expressed concern that the \$3,000 death gratuity established over three decades ago has been eroded by inflation making it insufficient to accomplish its intended purpose.

DOD provides an interment allowance for survivors of deceased active duty personnel. This allowance is \$75 if burial is in a national cemetery (or \$1,390, if the remains are prepared for burial by a private mortuary) and \$2,140 if burial is in a private cemetery. DOD also provides a travel allowance for survivors of deceased members to attend the member's burial ceremony.

The Social Security Administration also provides burial expense assistance in the form of a \$255 lump sum death payment to the surviving spouse or eligible children of a member covered by social security.

When burial is in a national cemetery, VA provides a headstone or grave marker without cost. Headstones or markers for private cemeteries will be provided and shipped free, but the applicant must pay the cost of placement at the grave. If a headstone or grave marker is purchased

from a commercial supplier, a maximum of \$80 is allowed toward the purchase price.

VA supervises a privately administered life insurance program for service members, the Servicemen's Group Life Insurance program. This insurance program, for which service personnel pay a premium, provides automatic coverage of members in the amount of \$50,000, unless the member elects a lower amount (\$40,000, \$30,000, \$20,000, or \$10,000) or no coverage at all. According to DOD officials, very few members request reduced coverage. The insurance proceeds are paid to the beneficiaries designated by the insured member or according to legal order of precedence if no beneficiary has been designated.

VA has two monthly benefit programs for survivors of service members who die on active duty. For deaths not involving willful misconduct, VA provides dependency and indemnity compensation. This benefit provides a monthly payment to the surviving spouse based on the member's grade or pay rate, with amounts ranging from \$539 per month to \$1,381, plus an allowance for each dependent child under age 18. Benefits may also be payable for certain helpless children, children aged 18 to 23 (if attending a VA-approved school), and certain dependent parents. If there is no surviving spouse, benefits are paid to unmarried children under age 18.

The VA Pension program may provide monthly benefits for the eligible survivors of a service member whose death involved willful misconduct, provided the deceased completed at least 2 years of honorable service. Eligibility and the amount of benefits under this program depend on the amount of the survivors' income and net worth.

The military retirement system provides no annuities for survivors of members with less than 20 years of service on the date of death. DOD's survivor benefit plan contains a provision for payment to the surviving spouse of a member who dies on active duty after completing 20 years of active service. The payment is equal to the difference, if any, between the amount of dependency and indemnity compensation paid to the spouse and 55 percent of the retired pay to which the member would have been entitled had he retired on the date of death.

In addition, service personnel are full participants in the social security system and are generally entitled to the same benefits and subject to the same eligibility criteria and rules as other employees. Depending upon eligibility, social security benefits may provide surviving spouses and

dependent children with monthly annuities and Medicare coverage. Social security benefits are paid in addition to any monthly compensation that may be provided by VA. However, VA benefits may be reduced because of social security benefits received.

If the member's death was not due to the member's misconduct, VA's civilian health and medical program can help pay for medical services and supplies obtained from civilian sources by the surviving spouse or children. These benefits are available only if the survivors are not eligible for medical care under the Civilian Health and Medical Program of the Uniformed Services (CHAMPUS) or Medicare.

VA also has various educational assistance programs. Surviving spouses and children may be eligible for up to 45 months of veterans education assistance.

The benefits described above apply to well over 99 percent of active duty personnel. However, there are some benefits that apply only to personnel in special situations, such as those in a "missing" status, prisoners of war, victims of terrorism, and personnel assigned to intelligence activities. For example, survivors of prisoners of war may be entitled to compensation due to the military member for their captors' violation of various provisions of the Geneva Convention and survivors of military intelligence personnel involved in clandestine activities and those whose identity is disguised or concealed are entitled a Foreign Service Death Gratuity (one year's basic pay) in place of the standard \$3,000 military death gratuity.

Beyond these government-sponsored programs, private organizations may also provide some death benefits. For example, the Navy Mutual Aid Association, a membership organization, provides death benefits of \$25,000, assists beneficiaries in filing claims for government benefits, and provides follow-up service as needed. Also, the Navy Relief Society provides temporary financial assistance (either a loan, gratuity, or combination of the two) to dependents of deceased Navy members, plus counseling, referral services, and other assistance.

Objectives, Scope, and Methodology

Our objectives were (1) to obtain information on DOD casualties and their causes for active duty military personnel who died in fiscal years 1980 through 1988 and (2) to identify programs that provide compensation and relief to survivors. We interviewed key DOD officials and obtained documents detailing the requested information. We did not verify the

accuracy of the information on deaths provided by DOD. We discussed this information with DOD and VA officials and included their comments where appropriate. We conducted our review from July 1989 to September 1989 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards.

Unless you publicly announce its contents earlier, we plan no further distribution of this report until 5 days from the date of this letter. At that time, we will send copies to the Chairmen, House and Senate Committees on Appropriations and on Armed Services; the Secretaries of Defense, the Army, Navy, and Air Force; the Secretary of Veterans Affairs; and the Director, Office of Management and Budget. We will also make copies available to other parties upon request.

GAO staff members who made major contributions to this fact sheet were William E. Beusse, Assistant Director, and Edward J. McLaughlin, Evaluator-in-Charge. If you need further assistance, please call me on 275-3990.

Sincerely yours,



Harold J. Johnson
Director, Manpower Issues

Worldwide U.S. Active Duty Military Deaths for Fiscal Years 1980 Through 1988

Cause*	Army	Navy	Air Force	Marine Corps	Total
Hostile action					
Gunshot or small arms fire	6	3	0	8	17
Artillery/rocket mortar fire	1	0	0	13	14
Bomb explosion	5	21	0	217	243
Other explosive device	0	1	0	0	1
Parachute accident or failure	0	4	0	0	4
Aircraft loss/crash at sea	0	0	2	0	2
Aircraft loss/crash not at sea	1	1	0	3	5
Other weapons effects	0	37	0	0	37
Other	4	0	0	0	4
Total	17	67	2	241	327
Accident					
Gunshot or small arms fire	122	38	31	47	236
Artillery/rocket mortar fire	9	0	0	3	12
Bomb explosion	21	2	1	0	24
Other explosive device	10	1	1	6	18
Parachute accident or failure	36	5	6	4	51
Fell/lost overboard from ship	0	44	0	2	46
Aircraft loss/crash at sea	10	201	77	107	395
Aircraft loss/crash not at sea	553	224	605	165	1,547
Vehicle loss or accident	3,197	2,225	1,427	910	7,759
Fire or burns	14	24	8	2	48
Fall or jump	146	93	50	31	320
Drowning	356	272	191	100	919
Suffocation	36	21	12	15	84
Electrocution	43	21	15	9	88
Stabbing	3	1	0	0	4
Misadventure ^b	0	0	0	1	1
Other weapons effects	0	1	0	0	1
Alcohol abuse or overdose	20	19	6	4	49
Drug abuse or overdose	57	20	12	4	93
Poisoning	19	13	3	5	40
Carbon monoxide poisoning	22	15	6	5	48
Strangulation	10	2	0	1	13
Beating	1	1	0	1	3
Hanging	2	15	0	0	17

(continued)

**Appendix I
Worldwide U.S. Active Duty Military Deaths
for Fiscal Years 1980 Through 1988**

Cause^a	Army	Navy	Air Force	Marine Corps	Total
Missing - accident	0	1	0	0	1
Other	150	130	103	67	450
Cause not reported	1	2	1	0	4
Total	4,838	3,389	2,555	1,489	12,271

Illness or disease

Suffocation	0	3	0	2	5
Heart attack/heart-related	947	576	659	137	2,319
Stroke/cerebrovascular accident	28	57	16	6	107
Respiratory failure	48	42	37	14	141
Cancer	89	79	34	22	224
Pneumonia	32	15	11	2	60
Malaria	0	1	0	0	1
Hepatitis	7	4	0	4	15
Alcohol abuse or overdose	15	2	12	2	31
Drug abuse or overdose	1	0	0	0	1
Other	344	137	128	33	642
Cause not reported	3	2	1	0	6
Total	1,514	918	898	222	3,552

Homicide - civil

Gunshot or small arms fire	294	151	90	81	616
Fire or burns	1	0	0	0	1
Drowning	0	0	0	1	1
Suffocation	2	0	0	0	2
Stabbing	118	68	35	38	259
Stroke/cerebrovascular accident	0	1	0	0	1
Drug abuse or overdose	0	1	0	1	2
Poisoning	1	0	0	0	1
Carbon monoxide poisoning	1	0	0	0	1
Strangulation	29	12	5	2	48
Beating	30	17	17	14	78
Other	11	4	7	3	25
Cause not reported	3	1	0	0	4
Total	490	255	154	140	1,039

(continued)

**Appendix I
Worldwide U.S. Active Duty Military Deaths
for Fiscal Years 1980 Through 1988**

Cause*	Army	Navy	Air Force	Marine Corps	Total
Suicide					
Gunshot or small arms fire	522	259	350	178	1,309
Fell/lost overboard from ship	0	2	0	0	2
Vehicle loss or accident	3	0	0	1	4
Fire or burns	1	1	0	0	2
Fall or jump	23	26	11	7	67
Drowning	1	3	1	1	6
Suffocation	4	6	2	1	13
Electrocution	0	1	0	0	1
Stabbing	3	7	0	1	11
Alcohol abuse or overdose	1	1	1	0	3
Drug abuse or overdose	39	17	21	1	78
Poisoning	5	4	2	2	13
Carbon monoxide poisoning	57	56	72	12	197
Strangulation	58	47	31	10	146
Hanging	104	91	70	22	287
Other	15	17	22	3	57
Cause not reported	0	1	1	0	2
Total	836	539	584	239	2,198

(continued)

**Appendix I
Worldwide U.S. Active Duty Military Deaths
for Fiscal Years 1980 Through 1988**

Cause^a	Army	Navy	Air Force	Marine Corps	Total
Other					
Gunshot or small arms fire	2	32	3	3	40
Bomb explosion	1	0	0	0	1
Vehicle loss or accident	0	1	1	0	2
Fall or jump	1	4	8	1	14
Drowning	0	6	2	0	8
Suffocation	0	2	4	0	6
Heart attack/heart-related	1	0	1	1	3
Respiratory failure	0	0	0	1	1
Alcohol abuse or overdose	0	5	0	0	5
Drug abuse or overdose	2	4	2	0	8
Poisoning	0	2	0	0	2
Carbon monoxide poisoning	1	9	0	0	10
Beating	0	0	0	1	1
Hanging	1	6	0	0	7
Missing	0	1	0	0	1
Other	8	21	22	4	55
Cause not reported	40	73	14	38	165
Total	57	166	57	49	329
Total deaths	7,752	5,334	4,250	2,380	19,716

^aThe classification of each death was made by the respective service casualty office using the categories prescribed by DOD Instruction 7730.63.

^bThis category applies to persons killed mistakenly or accidentally by friendly fire directed at a hostile force or what was believed to be a hostile force.

Military Service Casualty Offices

Department of the Air
Force

Headquarters Air Force Manpower and Personnel Center
ATTN: DPM CAB
Randolph Air Force Base, Texas 78150-6001

Department of the Army

U.S. Army Military Personnel Center
ATTN: DAPC-PE-SI
2461 Eisenhower Avenue, Room 912
Alexandria, Virginia 22331-0483

Department of the Navy

Naval Military Personnel Command
ATTN: NMPC 642, Room 1712
Washington, D.C. 20370-5642

Marine Corps

Commandant of the Marine Corps
Code MHP-10
Washington, D.C. 20380-0001

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